

**Decision Notice
For the
Valles Caldera National Preserve
Fiscal Year 2003 Interim Grazing Program**

Valles Caldera National Preserve
Sandoval County
May 20, 2003

Introduction

An Amendment to the August 2002 Environmental Assessment (EA) has been completed for the proposed grazing activities in the Valle Caldera National Preserve (VCNP) for the 2003 grazing season. The EA Amendment, and the Analysis File are available for public review at the Valles Caldera Trust offices at 2201 Trinity Drive Suite C Los Alamos, New Mexico 87544.

The Valles Caldera National Preserve is located in the center of the Jemez Mountains (see Project Location Map). The project area encompasses approximately 27,000 acres of grasslands accessible by livestock including the proposed Cerro Seco Pasture.

Decision

This Decision Notice identifies the Executive Director's reasons for selecting and implementing Alternative 2 from the Valles Caldera National Preserve Interim Grazing EA as amended for the 2003 grazing season. The decision is based on information gained during implementation of the 2002 grazing season, additional data on forage availability during drought years, the environmental assessment and amendment and comments received during the public scoping period (Appendix B). The decision also considers the results of informal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and New Mexico Game and Fish Department; the public, Native American Pueblos and Tribes, other agency comments, and applicable laws and regulations.

Alternative 2, as amended, will implement grazing in two herds for between 1,881-8,000 Animal Unit Months (470-2,000 head of livestock in a cow-calf operation) between June 1 and September 30. An Animal Unit Month is the amount of forage required by an animal unit for one month. The range analysis used 900 pounds of air-dry forage as required to support an animal unit month (AUM). Please see Appendix A for list of definitions.

Livestock will run in two herds. The first herd will consist of replacement heifers that will graze in the Valle Grande. The second herd will consist of cow-calf pairs that will graze the San Antonio and the Cerro Seco pasture. The Toledo Pasture will be used to temporarily support the herds should forage use levels be reached in the assigned pastures, or due to other management considerations. Any use in the Toledo Pasture, if at all, will occur mid- to late-summer.

Livestock management will focus use in the Valle Grande, Valle San Antonio and the Special Use Pastures with the option to run stock in both the Cerro Seco and the Toledo

Pastures. The Cerro Seco Pasture will be the first choice to provide forage to support the herd should management considerations (recreation conflicts, wildfire, or climatic conditions, etc.) or if forage is limited. The Toledo Pasture will be deferred for use during the 2003 grazing season; however, it could be used to support the herd for a short period of time, if necessary.

In the Valle Grande and Valle San Antonio Pastures temporary electric fencing will be erected to provide herd management to control the intensity and duration of use in mountain meadow communities and to protect sensitive aquatic habitat. Temporary electric fences will be erected as necessary to meet management and resource objectives. Access to water, salt and additional supplements will be used to provide additional herd management, and to improve livestock health and performance (weight gains).

Although as many as 2000 head can be run under this decision, the final stocking rates will be based on sight-specific range readiness analysis performed by an interdisciplinary-interagency effort in mid May. Periodic range readiness analysis will be performed mid-season and at other times as deemed necessary by the Trust to evaluate available forage, use levels, and/or the need to make adjustments to herd and pasture management.

Range riders will continue providing herd management to meet forage use levels as well as providing protection for water quality and aquatic habitat, wildlife management and heritage resource protection objectives.

ALTERNATIVE 2 (in detail)

This alternative was developed with the same emphasis, pasture areas, available use areas and assigned use levels as in the 2002 Environmental Assessment using the three large valleys (Valle Grande, Valle San Antonio and Valle Toledo) and with the addition of the Cerro Seco Pasture to support the herd. Use was not assigned nor will livestock use the Jaramillo Creek, Sulfur Canyon pastures, the southwestern portion of the VCNP, slopes greater than 30%, and past timber harvest units (VCNP EA for the Interim Grazing Strategy; August, 2002; page 38-39). ***This Alternative remains the same in all aspects as describe in the EA of August 2002 with the exception of including the Cerro Seco Pasture for livestock grazing.***

The available forage (AUMs) in the Cerro Seco Pasture is illustrated in the last row of the table below. Please note; available AUMs in the Cerro Seco Pasture are not assigned to support an increase in herd number, but provides data as to how much forage is available should the Trust decide to use that Pasture to relieve grazing pressure from other Valles.

Alternative 2-Assigned Use

35 % of the total annual forage production within:

Mountain Grasslands

Grazeable Woodlands

15% allowable use is assigned to riparian corridors found in:

Mountain Meadows (Riparian Areas)

Carrying Capacity Based on Assigned Use

	Grazable Acres	2002 Forage Production (average) AUMs	Unfavorable Years Forage Production AUMs	Favorable Years Forage Production AUMs
Total Assigned AUM's	14,227	1,881	4,686	9,573
Cerro Seco Pasture	2,416	454	889	2,140

ACTIONS COMMON TO ALL ACTION ALTERNATIVES**Adaptive Management and Research**

Monitoring and research are fundamental components of each Alternative, as required as part of the Act establishing the Valles Caldera National Preserve and as a “key” component of any activities that are undertaken on the VCNP. The results and information gained through monitoring and research will be used in an adaptive management process considering both socio-economic and ecological issues and concerns.

The management process is “adaptive” in that what is learned from month-to-month and year-to-year will be used to potentially alter management approaches and strategies to meet the objectives of this and other projects. Consolidation of information and data, and changed management strategies as a result of monitoring, will be summarized in the Trust’s annual report to Congress. The adaptive management strategy and research cannot be underestimated in its value as a learning tool for understanding certain aspects of management and ecology of the VCNP.

Changes in livestock numbers and allowable use may occur (within the range of the selected alternative) as a component of a proposed experimental design that is structured to evaluate grazing effects (frequency, duration, and magnitude of use), or on ecological processes, dynamics, ecological health and/or watershed protection, cattle and elk interactions, behavioral and distribution changes by elk, riparian restoration, and water quality. Proposed studies should be complementary to improving the knowledge and understanding of the VCNP and applicable to improving and sustaining the VCNP ranch operations.

During periods of drought, forage maybe provided to area livestock operators, based on range readiness assessments and other monitoring or research data for determining stocking rates and herd management. The Valles Caldera Trust may choose not to turn out livestock, reduce numbers or alter season of use, in any given year, as a result.

Other ongoing research assessing ecological parameters will continue. As part of each alternative, including the No Action Alternative, production-utilization cages will continue

in both Mountain Valley and Meadow plant communities to assess use levels by livestock and elk. Rangeland Monitoring providing baseline data of the plant composition of riparian-wetland communities will continue.

Season of Use/Herd Management

Season of use will occur between June 1 and September 30. Shortening the period of livestock use on either end of the proposed season of use could occur on or after June 1, to before or on September 30.

The Trust could delay, postpone, or cancel livestock entry on to the VCNP due to climatic conditions or for other reasons outside the scope of this analysis.

During the proposed season of use, the Trust may set stocking rates (number of AUs or AUMs) for Unfavorable and Favorable growing conditions, or drought at levels lower than those analyzed under each alternative. Under drought conditions the Trust will site specifically assess available forage and assign use and stocking levels based on the available forage determined through an interdisciplinary/interagency range readiness assessment. Stocking rates and forage use levels will be within the assigned use values within this Alternative.

The interim grazing plan includes daily use of a Range Rider to distribute and make changes in stocking density during the period of grazing use by monitoring livestock and elk behavior and allowable use.

Upon arrival at the VCNP, all livestock will be confined for a specified period of time (3-5 days) to clean stomach contents of noxious weed seeds.

Class of Livestock

Class of livestock and/or proportion of each class may include cow/calf, replacement heifer, and/or steers.

Monitoring (in addition to research activities)

Production/utilization cages will be used for quantitative assessment of forage production and use.

Range Rider Daily Logs

Examples of entries into daily range rider monitoring logs will indicate where and how long the herds grazed in any given area, where they watered and how long, notes on estimated use levels, the presence and number of elk, where and how long an elk herd remains in a given area and an estimate of forage use.

Monitoring Protocol

Production/Utilization assessment following stock movements

Data summaries

Year-End Monitoring Review (Interdisciplinary/Interagency teams)

Field and Data Review by an Interdisciplinary Team

Heritage Resource Protection

Known sites within pastures will be monitored to establish baseline conditions and to identify any extant erosion or disturbance. On-going survey for any other projects (e.g., roads surveys) will seek to identify heritage resources that could be affected by elk and cattle grazing. Implementation and effectiveness monitoring will occur on known heritage resource site locations.

Maintenance

The headquarters corral, non-historical hay sheds, and pasture fences will be maintained to support 10-15 horses for Range Riders and other administration and security uses. Fence lines known to be a hazard to elk movement could be modified by dropping or removing the top wire, and/or by removing segments of fence line not needed for ranching operation.

Special Use Pastures

The FIELDS, HEADQUARTERS TRAPS, and San Antonio TRAP were determined to be essential in facilitating ranch operations. It is anticipated that these pastures will experience grazing use by horses (riding stock for range rider and fencing crew) and by some cattle needing medical attention. The grazing capacities (forage production) for these pastures (948 AUMs during unfavorable conditions and 1,844 AUMs under favorable conditions) are not allocated towards supporting the main livestock herd(s).

ROUND MOUNTAIN and WILLOW MOUNTAIN pastures will be used during the delivery of cattle (on or about June 1) for quarantine, medical examinations, vaccinations, and handling prior to initiating the prescribed grazing system. Forage in these pastures was not used to calculate available AUMs in support of the herd.

SHIPPING pasture will be used only during the fall when cattle are brought into the shipping pens to be transported off the Valles Caldera National Preserve. Forage in this pasture was not used to calculate available AUMs in support of the herd.

Background for the Decision

Alternative 2 was developed in compliance with Section 102A of The Valles Caldera Preserve Act (Public Law 106-248 July 25, 2000), and the DRAFT National Environmental Act (NEPA) Procedures of the Valles Caldera Trust for the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

Reasons for the Decision

The Executive Director selected Alternative 2, as amended, because it best meets the purpose and need for the proposed actions to continue the interim grazing program on the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

Alternative 2, as amended, was selected because it strikes the best balance between the Key Issues and the need to continue grazing on the VCNP, meets the direction from the Valles Caldera Trust (Board) while providing the greatest flexibility to respond to the uncertainties and opportunities through an adaptive management process.

Alternative 2, as amended provides:

- 1) Continuation of the experimental grazing program on an interim basis;
- 2) The greatest flexibility of management options, and a broader range of AUMs to graze, provides for monitoring, changes in management as a result of data gained through monitoring and research, forage conditions, or other resource concerns; and
- 3) For the Key Issues defined in the Environmental Assessment.

When compared to Alternatives 1 and 3, Alternative 2, as amended, provides for continued grazing on the Valles Caldera National Preserve while being responsive to the cultural, social and economic interests of the livestock operators as well as being sensitive to the issues of water quality and aquatic habitat, and elk-livestock interaction issues. It addresses the concerns of both for those who wish to graze stock and for those who wish not to graze stock on the VNCP by deferred and rest rotation herd management, and by leaving large portions of the VCNP void of livestock. Selection of this Alternative continues to provide the greatest flexibility to incorporate experimental design for research or to respond to resource and management concerns or opportunities.

Alternatives 1 and 3 provide less flexibility for ranch and herd operation compared to Alternative 2. Alternative 1 provides for an acceptable range of livestock numbers, but has less flexibility by not having the option to defer use in one of the large valles. Alternative 3 would require one of the Valles to be rested without the option to graze should it be necessary to meet management objectives. The addition of the Cerro Seco Pasture enhances the flexibility the Trust and the Executive Director seeks.

Alternative 2 assigns low levels of use (15%) in sensitive aquatic habitat areas (wetland and riparian plant communities) as does Alternative 3.

Selection of Alternative 4 (No Action Alternative) would defer re-establishing grazing at this time. Selection of this alternative would eliminate the potential effects of livestock grazing. Also, it would not meet the purpose and need for this project, nor would it address the shortage of forage currently experienced by livestock operators.

Issues

Three Key Issues were identified for the project based on the scoping through interdisciplinary team discussions and public participation. Public comments were received during our three Public Open House Scoping Meetings and through e-mails, phone calls and letters. Public participation assisted with defining the Key Issues associated with the proposed actions. Comments and concerns specific to the proposed actions were considered, evaluated and incorporated into the planning and analysis of this

project. The following is a summary of my rationale for selection of Alternative 2 as it relates to the Key Issues:

Water Quality and Aquatic Habitat

The physical effects (trampling, removal of biomass, etc.) of grazing on the grassland and riparian communities of the Valle Grande and Valle San Antonio could cause surface runoff, and transport of sediment and manure which could adversely affect the water quality, channel stability and aquatic habitat of East Fork Jemez River and San Antonio Creek.

Whereas all Alternatives adequately address this issue and provide protection of water quality and aquatic resources, some more strongly address this issue than others.

While Alternatives 1 and 3 (as amended) provided for protection and improvement of the Water Quality and Aquatic habitat of the San Antonio and East Fork Jemez River, the Executive Director found **Alternative 2** (as amended) to be sufficiently responsive to this issue by providing protection of water quality and aquatic habitat while allowing the greatest flexibility with when, where, at what level and what duration livestock will be allowed to graze.

Alternative 2 addresses this issue by assigning a range of livestock numbers, lower assigned use in wetland-riparian areas, not assigning use in the Rincon and the remaining VCNP provides for elk-livestock issues by providing forage for elk and space absent of management activities and livestock.

Minimal forage demand in upland and wetland-riparian areas provides the greatest level of watershed and ecological protection.

Although Alternatives 1 and 3 (as amended) provide for water quality and aquatic habitat protection by minimizing forage allocation in upland areas and in wetland-riparian areas, these Alternatives lack the flexibility to alter the location livestock could graze, or more importantly, where they may not graze within the assigned use areas. Alternative 2 (as amended) is as sensitive to this issue as Alternative 3 by assigning no more than 15% of the available forage in wetland-riparian area, whereas Alternative 1 assigns 35% use.

The No Action Alternative (Alternative 4) was considered, given that deferred re-establishment of livestock grazing would effectively eliminate the potential impacts of grazing; however, it would not meet the purpose and need for this project.

Elk-Cattle Forage Use and Behavior

The common use of a landscape and forage base by both elk and livestock could cause overuse of the forage and browse plants in the VCNP resulting in adverse effects to the ecological and hydrological conditions of the VCNP. Cattle grazing could cause changes in elk behavior resulting in elk movement outside the VCNP into the surrounding Jemez Mountains, Santa Fe National Forest lands, Los Alamos Laboratory

and Bandelier National Monument resulting in forage use on surrounding private, State and Federal lands.

Whereas all Alternatives adequately address this issue and provide adequate forage and resources to support the elk herd while grazing livestock, some alternatives more strongly address this issue than others.

While Alternatives 1 and 3 (as amended) provided adequate forage and resources to support the elk herd while grazing livestock, **Alternative 2** (as amended) was found to be most responsive to this issues. This Alternative provides adequate forage and land allocation for elk-habitat, and allows the greatest flexibility on when, where, at what level and for what duration livestock will be allowed to graze areas that could affect the interactions between elk and livestock.

Minimal forage demand in upland and wetland-riparian, while not assigning use to any high elevation grassland, harvest units or steep slopes, provides the greatest amount of forage and land area absent of stock in order to support elk herd.

Socio-Cultural

The Valles Caldera National Preserve is one of the most aesthetically beautiful and culturally valued landscapes in New Mexico and the United States. Historically the VCNP has been valued for its resources (forage, wildlife, geo-thermal, timber production) and its beauty. These interests remain as strong today. Prehistorically and today, the Valles Caldera National Preserve remains a sacred and spiritually significant place for Native Americans and others of diverse backgrounds. These cultural interests may be affected by re-establishing grazing on the VCNP.

Whereas all Alternatives adequately address the socio-cultural concerns of many, it will not satisfy all aspects and expectations of the Public.

While Alternative 1 and 3 (as amended) provide for the expectations of the livestock operators by providing an opportunity to run stock on the VCNP, they will not meet the full expectations of many who wish to see historic stock levels to return.

Providing large portions of the VCNP without livestock, the additional deferment of some pastures (Valle Toledo and Cerro Seco Pastures) and the natural topography of steep, forested mountains allow those who oppose livestock grazing on the VCNP areas for recreation and spiritual endeavors without the presence of livestock.

Responsible Official

GARY K. ZIEHE
Executive Director

date

Valles Caldera Trust, 2201 Trinity Drive Suite C, Los Alamos, NM 87544

